Eavesdropping on Europe

Niall McKay

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If the European Parliament has its way, the lid is about to come off what is reputedly one of the most powerful, secretive, and extensive spy networks in history -- if, in fact, it really exists.

In October, Europe's governing body will commission a full report into the workings of Echelon, a global network of highly sensitive listening posts operated in part by America's most clandestine intelligence organization, the National Security Agency.

"Frankly, the only people who have any doubt about the existence of Echelon are in the United States," said Glyn Ford, a British member of the European Parliament and a director of Scientific and Technical Options Assessment, or STOA, a technology advisory committee to the parliament.

Echelon is reportedly able to intercept, record, and translate any electronic communication -- telephone, data, cellular, fax, email, telex -- sent anywhere in the world. The parliamentary report will focus on concerns that the system has expanded and is now zeroed in on the secrets of European companies and elected officials.

The parliament is alarmed at reports of Echelon's impressive capabilities, and during a debate on 19 September, the European Union called for accountability. The parliament stressed that the NSA and the Government Communications Headquarters, which jointly operate Echelon, must adopt measures to guard against the system's abuse.

International cooperation on law enforcement is important, Ford said, but there are limits. "We want to establish a code of conduct for the systems to protect EU citizens and governments."

Across the Atlantic, Patrick Poole, deputy director for the Free Congress Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank, is preparing a report on Echelon to present to Republican members of Congress. "I believe it's time we start to bring this matter to our elected officials," he said.

Poole and Ford have their work cut out for them: Neither Britain nor the United States will admit that Echelon even exists. The NSA declined any comment on a series of faxed questions for this story.

Keyword: Bomb

Over the years, enough information has leaked to suggest that the spy network is more than science fiction. Echelon came to the attention of the EU Parliament following a report commissioned by STOA last year.

"Unlike many of the electronic spy systems developed during the Cold War, Echelon is designed for primarily non-military targets: governments, organizations, and businesses in virtually every country," the report said.

According to the STOA report and stories in *The New York Times, The Daily Telegraph,* and *The Guardian*, Echelon consists of a network of listening posts, antenna fields, and radar stations. The system is backed by computers that use language translation, speech recognition, and keyword searching to automatically sift through telephone, email, fax, and telex traffic.

The system is principally operated by the NSA and the GCHQ, but reportedly also relies on cooperation with "signals intelligence" operations in other countries, including the Communications Security Establishment of Canada, Australia's Defense Signals Directorate, and New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau.

John Pike, a security analyst for the Federation of American Scientists, said each of the five government agencies takes responsibility for its own geographical region.

Each agency reportedly maintains a glossary of keywords. If Echelon intercepts a transmission containing a word or phrase contained in the glossary -- bomb, for example -- the full conversation, email, or fax is recorded and shared among the agencies.

"Echelon intercepts Internet traffic at the transport layer, such as the TCP/IP layer, so the system doesn't care too much what it is or where it came from," said Pike. "For analog traffic, such as telephone conversations, it uses automatic voice-recognition technology to scan the conversations."

Abuses of Power?

While the EU is aware that Echelon may be a useful tool for tracking down global terrorists, drug barons, and international criminals, Ford said the parliament is concerned that the system may also be used for espionage, spying on peaceful nations, or gaining unfair economic advantage over non-member nations.

Indeed, there are many reported instances of the British and US intelligence agencies working together to gather information in a questionable manner.

A 1993 BBC documentary about NSA's Menwith Hill facility in England revealed that peace protestors had broken into the installation and stolen part of this glossary, known as "the Dictionary." The documentary alleged that Menwith Hill -- a sprawling installation covering 560 acres and employing more than 1,200 people -- was Echelon's nerve center.

Further evidence emerged last year, when British Telecom told a court that it provides high-bandwidth telecommunications into the Menwith Hill facility and from the facility to the United States, using a transatlantic fiber-optic network.

"I believe that these five intelligence agencies are working from a single plan," said Pike.

British investigative journalist Duncan Campbell was the first to report about Echelon in a 1988 article in *The New Statesman*. He believes that there is a very thin line between intelligence gathering and commercial espionage.

Pike, of the Federation of American Scientists, believes the intelligence agencies operate in a gray area of international law. For example, there is no law prohibiting the NSA from intercepting telecommunications and data traffic in the United Kingdom and no law prohibiting GCHQ from doing the same thing in the United States.

"The view by the NSA seems to be anything that can be intercepted is fair game," said Pike. "And it's very hard to find out what, if any, restraints can be employed."